

As the winter cold sets in, the Building Services Department urges residents to use portable heating devices, fireplaces and wood stoves safely. Portable heaters can be an affordable supplement or alternative to central heating. However, when used improperly, space heaters can cause carbon monoxide poisoning, fire and even death.

“With the high cost of fuel, many people may be purchasing a space heater or adding a fireplace or wood-burning stove to their home,” said Building Official Mark Rice. “When not used or installed properly, these appliances can present serious safety hazards.”

Here are a few simple rules for using heaters safely:

- Keep the area around the heater clear at all times with at least three feet of open space around the unit so that nothing catches fire.
- Supervise the heater when it's on, especially when children and pets are nearby, and turn the heater off when you leave the room.
- Don't leave the heater on at night.
- Fill kerosene heaters outside so that fumes and accidental spills don't cause a fire.
- Use the correct fuel for the heater, usually K-1 kerosene for kerosene heaters use 1-K kerosene.
- Be sure you've installed smoke detectors and carbon monoxide detectors and that they are working properly.

If you're in the market for a fireplace or wood-burning stove, contact the Building Services Department first to determine if you need a permit before installation and inspection by a trained professional. “We recommend you purchase a fireplace or wood-burning stove that is labeled by an approved testing and inspection agency,” said Rice. “Work with your builder to find the best interior location. That decision will be based on the chimney's path.”

Once installed, inspected and approved, read the instruction manual carefully to understand how the fireplace or wood-burning stove works. It is also a good idea to contact your insurance agent. Most insurance companies require a rider to the homeowners' policy and a copy of the final inspection report.